

Kindness

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Preachers like me have to keep our eyes open. You never know when an idea for a sermon will jump up and slap you in the face. The smart money has to stay alert. The rule I follow is one little Ray Andersen learned in Little League so many years ago and that is: "Three strikes and you're out."

In my latest trip to the plate I took my first strike last month in Bangor, Maine, when I spotted a sign in front of a church saying, "Throw kindness around like confetti." My second strike came at a lobster pound near our campsite where Karla and I, being good tourists, were consuming multiple quantities of "lobstah". I was watching an oriental family eat lobsters and they were putting the tail right into their mouths and trying to suck the meat out. Very off-putting, but I thought maybe it's a cultural thing. An elderly woman gently approached them and kindly showed them how to push the tail meat out of the shell. Easy-peasy. They were very appreciative and thanked her profusely. As we were leaving I said to her she was kind to show them how to do that. She said, "A little kindness goes a long way." Then the 3rd strike was in a bookstore in Southeast Harbor. I was killing time waiting for the Contessa to finish her shopping when I spotted this book, *"The Power of Kindness."* Clearly someone was trying to tell me something. So I took my three strikes, shouldered my bat, and went back to the dugout to see if I could turn these messages of kindness into a half decent sermon. As they say in Maine, "I set down to 'ponda."

I wondered where has kindness gone to hide and why? I'm sure we'll all agree that kindness is in short supply these days. One readily apparent reason is our digital, computerized society. We text instead of talking, we get recorded messages instead of a real person, a computer voice will say hello and thank you at the supermarket, people look at their smart phones and not at you, eat in front of a screen and die alone. Warmth and human contact are an endangered species on the way to extinction. "Have a nice day" doesn't exactly count as human contact.

Sometimes I think we're going through an Ice Age of the heart. Human relationships are getting colder. Communication is becoming more hurried and impersonal. Instead of global warming we're having global cooling. Profit and efficiency are more valued than human warmth and genuine presence. Human warmth is only valued when it can sell something like 'homemade' ice cream, bread baked the way it "used to be,' soup 'just like Grandma used to make,' the phone that allows you to be 'in touch.' And without human contact there can be no kindness.

This sorry stew is stirred by our current President who traffics in revenge and hostility. Kindness and compassion are sadly not in his repertoire.

But if you and I let it, kindness can fill our days. Kindness is abundant in the human spirit. Kindness is the contact, the warmth, the attention, the care we all yearn for. If you are kind to yourself, you will also be kind to others. I don't have to remind you who said, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

In my life with deaf people I often met folks whose childhood was not enriched by non-communicating hearing parents nor the hearing world around them. I often wondered if they were treated with care, listened to with attention, valued, encouraged, or comforted in pain. How often were they in touch with kindness? Instead they experienced the wound of neglect, the poison of resentment, the prison of loneliness. I don't have to remind you who said, "If you do it for one of the least of these, you do it for me."

Kindness is a guide, a roadmap, part of anyone's work on themselves. It can be easily activated and learned. It's qualities of warmth, gratitude, and trust are urgently needed. Kindness is the simplest way of coping with so many hurdles, of feeling better, and of enjoying life. It is problem solver #1. I don't need to remind you who said, "I am come that ye may have life and have it more abundantly."

One of the things I learned in this book is that our brains are actually hardwired for kindness. Hard wired for altruism. We are also hardwired to feel other people's pains and joys. Studies have shown that whenever we commit kindness, either accidentally or on purpose, we get a jolt of serotonin, which is a very good feeling. Try it, you'll like it. Giving a gift will actually make the brain happy. I don't need to remind you who said, "It is better to give than to receive."

Let me conclude with a story by Leo Tolstoy titled *What Men Live By*. A dirt poor shoemaker is heading home, worrying about supporting his family. On his way he finds a naked man, alone in the night dying of cold. The shoemaker passes by, but then changes his mind, returns and brings the man home with him. He and his wife feed him and give him shelter. The man, whose name is Mikhail stays on and works for the shoemaker. Years go by and then one day Mikhail tells them who he really is. He's an angel sent by God. His mission: to learn what humans live by. He tells them how at first humans look ugly and mean; but they change the minute they do something kind. That's when they became radiant and beautiful. He can now go back and report that love and kindness is what humans do best and when they are happiest, although not always what they live by.

I may have to remind you it was Paul who wrote, "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you."

But I don't have to remind you who said, ""Love your enemies, do good, lend expecting nothing in return and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil people."

I usually say Amen after these pearls of wisdom, but since this started in Maine I'll end with something I heard from an old Maine preacher: "Carry it on."